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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001799

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN PLAYING FOR HIGH STAKES

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun continues to believe that he and only he deserves the presidency, and will not participate in any efforts, including the French initiative, to find a consensus, according to his advisor and son-in-law, Gebran Bassil. Bassil envisioned two scenarios for the presidency: either a consensus candidate will emerge, in which case Aoun will not participate, or an interim government will be formed, leading to early parliamentary elections. Bassil would not rule out Aoun's participation in a second government. Aoun's increasingly threatening rhetoric is an unwelcome development in the final week before President Lahoud is due to step down. End summary.

AOUN THE "STATESMAN"

2. (C) Pol/Econ Chief met with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun advisor and son-in-law Gebran Bassil at his home on November 14. Bassil launched into the familiar FPM liturgy about all the wrongs committed against FPM (unfair electoral law, contested seats from the 2005 parliamentary elections which were never resolved because the government dissolved the constitutional court, the illegitimacy of Siniora government after the walkout of the five Shia ministers). Despite all this, the FPM in 2005 recognized Hariri as leader of Sunni majority and therefore went along with Siniora as PM, and recognized Berri (to whose party he claims FPM let have some of the 2005 seats) as leader of Shia majority, now it was time for them to recognize Aoun as leader of Christian majority.

3. (C) Bassil confirmed that Aoun's position on the presidency was still either "me or no one." Only Aoun has the popular legitimacy to be president, Bassil argued, adding that if others can come up with a solution, fine, but Aoun will not play a part. He called Aoun a "statesman" who was the only one who cared about the good of the country. Pol/Econ Chief countered that making threats about chaos and civil war, as Aoun has repeatedly done in his statements to the press, wasn't very statesmanlike. Bassil replied, in

essence, that everyone else was breaking all the rules, so why shouldn't Aoun? Two wrongs don't make a right, Pol/Econ Chief said, and responding to one side's bad behavior with more behavior did not appear very statesmanlike.

#### REFUSING TO GO ALONG WITH FRENCH

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14. (C) On the French initiative, Bassil reported that Aoun told Kouchner he did not want his name on the list, though Bassil believed Marada leader Suleiman Franjeh had given Aoun's name. He believed the Patriarch's names already had been sent to Berri and Hariri. Bassil commented that Patriarch should not be involved in politics. Furthermore, which criteria should be used to pick the candidates, and how do we tell whether the candidates really meet these criteria? he asked. Pol/Econ Chief said the candidates should adhere to the principles of a free, sovereign, and independent Lebanon and be committed to UN Security Council Resolutions like 1559 and 1701. Bassil retorted that anyone could put on paper that they support those issues, but Aoun is the only one who really does. Even (March 14 candidate) Nassib Lahoud doesn't have good principles, Bassil protested, citing a recent press report that in his youth Lahoud had been a member of a pro-Syrian Palestinian militia group in (Saïqa) in 1969. Aoun has been fighting Syria for years, Bassil claimed. Furthermore, he is the only candidate with a credible plan for dealing with Hizballah; since it is impossible to tell Hizballah to put down its arms immediately, he said, Aoun's strategy was to postpone the confrontation and deal with it in a year or two.

#### TWO SCENARIOS

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15. (C) Bassil envisioned two scenarios for the presidency:

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1) either the French initiative produces a consensus president; or 2) Lahoud appoints an interim government after consulting parliament. Lahoud would step down in this scenario, and the interim government, which would include members of the opposition, would take on presidential powers. Both sides continue to work on electing president, but if they were unable, the interim government would change the electoral law and call for early parliamentary elections. Those elections could be in six months or in a year and a half, Bassil suggested; either way, the current parliament will have been in power at least three years, plenty of time in his opinion.

16. (C) Bassil refused to entertain the possibility of Lahoud stepping down and PM Siniora's government taking over presidential powers, saying "let's not argue." Why does the U.S. give Siniora such strong support, he asked. Pol/Econ Chief that Siniora is the democratically chosen prime minister representing the majority in power. Bassil complained that the U.S. supported March 14 when it made its alliance with Hizballah and Siniora when he let Hizballah into the government, but when the FPM tried to reach an understanding with Hizballah that will work towards disarmament, the U.S. put it on its hate list.

17. (C) Bassil argued that it is President Lahoud's constitutional right to stay in Baabda Palace if no president is elected. Pol/Econ Chief interjected that the amendment extending his mandate for three years specifically puts the end at midnight on November 23, 2007. Bassil responded that, since the majority has violated the constitution and is talking about electing a president using half plus one, Lahoud also can violate it. Pol/Econ noted that, while the language on quorum is ambiguous, the language on Lahoud's term extension and end is very clear. Bassil repeated Aoun's argument that a half plus one president would be illegitimate because it would exclude a major part of country; Lebanon is a special democracy that can only function by consensus, he

said, the majority in parliament doesn't reflect actual majority of country.

AOUN WILL DECIDE AT LAST MINUTE  
WHETHER TO JOIN SECOND GOVERNMENT  
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¶18. (C) Asked to give his assurances that Aoun would not participate in a second government should President Emile Lahoud appoint one before the end of his term, Bassil said Aoun will decide "at the last minute." Acknowledging that this could lead to the U.S. imposing sanctions on the General, Bassil admitted that a second government probably would lead to chaos. Pol/Econ Chief responded that the U.S. sanctions were aimed precisely at preventing chaos by deterring people from joining a second government. Nobody wants chaos, Gebran said; it's not good for anybody, only Hizballah benefits. Hizballah not only has arms, but popular Shia support, so they can easily take over. The FPM has Christian popular support, but no arms, he claimed.

¶19. (C) Pol/Econ Chief asked about Aoun's November 11 al-Manar interview, which contained some ambiguous language that could be interpreted as threats. Was it meant as threats? Leaning forward with a twinkle in his eye, Gebran replied deliberately, "Yes." Later, however, he clarified that by threatening, he did not mean the FPM was going to kill people; "that's not our style." But Aoun has been attacked from all sides, including the U.S., for too long, Bassil said, and it is the only way to counter March 14 threats to go forward with half plus one. Jumblatt makes statements that are just as threatening, he said, but you don't question him.

COMMENT  
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¶10. (C) Bassil, more than any of our other FPM contacts, is an authoritative voice for General Aoun, and his conversation with Pol/Econ Chief tracked closely with the Ambassador's recent meetings with Aoun. Aoun appears to be keeping the stakes high, either in hopes of obtaining a big payoff in terms of cabinet formation in the next government, or, by staying out of the process entirely, place himself in a good position (along with his Hizballah allies) to argue that the

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new president does not enjoy the support of the majority of the Christians nor of the Shia, and is therefore illegitimate.

¶11. (C) While we cannot rule out Aoun taking military action (it would not be the first time; and we remind our readers that it was Aoun's troops in 1989 that besieged the U.S. Embassy, closing it for nearly a year), we hope that when his bluff is called, he will fold. In the meantime, however, his increasingly threatening rhetoric, particular toward the U.S. (his November 15 appearance on OTV was overtly hostile toward U.S. policy in Lebanon) is a disturbing development in the final week before the end of President Lahoud's mandate. End comment.

FELTMAN